



## Catholic Civil Rights League

Ligue Catholique pour les Droits de L'Homme

### The Clergy and Politics

Considering clergy <sup>1</sup> in general, political activity is not their responsibility, but that of the laity.<sup>2</sup> Consistent with this, Canon Law not only commands clergy to acknowledge and promote the mission of the laity in the world,<sup>3</sup> but forbids clergy to assume public office.<sup>4</sup> Granted: clerics may, with the permission of their superiors, play an active role in political parties or trade unions in order to defend the rights of the Church or to promote the common good.<sup>5</sup> However, this kind of activity is clearly exceptional, justified only when the laity is unable to act effectively without direct clerical assistance. Such circumstances have existed and continue to exist from time to time in different places, but they do not now exist in Canada.

Bishops <sup>6</sup> do not exceed their authority or competence simply by commenting upon political issues. Faith and morals are a bishop's proper and primary concern. But marriage, divorce, pornography, abortion and euthanasia are all moral issues which are the subject of intense political debate; so is the just distribution of earthly goods. The Church has not only the right but the duty "to pass moral judgements even in matters relating to politics whenever the fundamental rights of man or the salvation of souls requires it."<sup>7</sup>

Neither of these concepts can be narrowly defined. Among the fundamental rights which popes and bishops have defended, for example, one finds private property, life, health, religious freedom, the right to form unions, the right to a just wage and decent hours of work, and the right to be free of excessive taxation.<sup>8</sup>

The goal is to help shape public policy that is in conformity with the law rooted in our nature that governs us all no matter what our religious belief. Thus, politicians are called to try and ensure that the laws that govern us protect human life, respect the human person, preserve the unique nature of marriage, support family, ensure the safety of children, guarantee religious freedom and make it possible for all citizens to share in the conditions that are necessary for humane living.<sup>9</sup>

In arguing for such things, bishops attempt to clearly enunciate general principles concerning the purpose and use of created things,<sup>10</sup> peace, war, the just distribution of material goods and the "fraternal coexistence of all peoples."<sup>11</sup> They may also, "after mature reflection and with the help of qualified persons," pass judgement on the morality of secular works or institutions, and explain what is needed to safeguard and promote transcendent moral and religious principles.<sup>12</sup> Bishops may do this well or do it badly, but they do not "interfere" in politics by doing it.

The relationship of bishops with politicians who identify themselves as Catholics begins with three assumptions: the truth of Catholic teaching, the inseparability of faith and life <sup>13</sup> and the sincerity and integrity of the politicians.

If Catholic politicians support policies and laws that seriously contradict Catholic teaching, bishops, led by charity, will assume that the politicians' views are the result of ignorance or poor instruction. Since it is reasonable to believe that sincere Catholics would not wish to remain in error about Catholic teaching,

it is reasonable for bishops to attempt to correct them.

Problems arise only when nominally Catholic politicians obstinately refuse to accept the correction of their bishops: when, deliberately rejecting Catholic teaching, they continue to identify themselves as ? practising? Catholics and insist upon receiving the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist.

Recently, some bishops have suggested that they may not give the Eucharist to nominally Catholic politicians who support policies and laws that flagrantly contradict Catholic teaching on issues fundamental to the common good. Many have accused these bishops of misusing their religious authority. Such accusations betray ignorance of Catholic teaching <sup>14</sup> and a misunderstanding of episcopal authority and responsibility.<sup>15</sup>

Consider the case of a politician who obstinately - and publicly - opposes long-standing, fundamental policies of his party. No one would fault the party leader for refusing to sign his nomination papers, expelling him from caucus, or even terminating his party membership. The failure to take such action would bring into question the importance and validity of the policy. It would also create considerable confusion about what membership in the party actually means and what the party stands for.

No one doubts that the leader of a political party is obliged to preserve the integrity of his party and its policies, and can, if need be, discipline or expel party members. A bishop has similar obligations to the Church and its teachings. There are, to be sure, significant differences between a political party and the Church. However, these differences provide additional support for the position of a bishop who, after careful reflection, decides to apply sanctions to an intransigent politician.

In the end, politicians remain free to vote as they wish. Membership in political parties and churches is, after all, voluntary. A politician who has a fundamental disagreement with his party is free to leave it. A politician who has a serious disagreement with the Church can do the same though not without the risk of significant spiritual consequences.<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

1. ?Cleric? and ?clergy? in the Catholic Church are terms that denote only men who are ordained: deacons, priests or bishops.
2. "Their secular character is proper and peculiar to the laity. Although those in Holy Orders may sometimes be engaged in secular activities, or even practise a secular profession, yet by reason of their particular vocation, they are principally and expressly ordained to the sacred ministry." Vatican Council II, [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church](#), 21 November, 1964 (Lumen Gentium) 31
3. "Clerics are to acknowledge and promote the mission which the laity, each for his or her part, exercises in the Church and in the world." [The Code of Canon Law](#) (1983) Canon 275(2)
4. "Clerics are forbidden to assume public office whenever it means sharing in the exercise of civil power." [The Code of Canon Law](#) (1983) Canon 285(3)
5. "[Clergy] are not to play an active role in political parties or in directing trade unions unless, in the judgement of the competent ecclesiastical authority, this is required for the defence of the rights of the church or to promote the common good." [The Code of Canon Law](#) (1983) Canon 287(2)
6. Comments concerning statements by bishops can also be applied to priests, though their authority is

much more limited, and when it is necessary to speak to political issues it is usually a bishop who does so.

7. Vatican Council II, [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World](#), 7 December, 1965 (Gaudium et Spes), 76.

8. For example, Leo XII, [On the Condition of the Working Classes](#) (Rerum Novarum) 1891; Pius XI, [On Social Reconstruction](#) (Quadragesimo Anno), 1931; John XXIII, [Christianity and Social Progress](#) (Mater et Magistra) 1961; Paul VI, [On the Development of Peoples](#) (Populorum Progressio) 1967; John Paul II, [On Human Work](#) (Laborem Exercens), 1981; [On Social Concern](#) (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis) 1987.

9. Bishop Frederick Henry (Calgary), No communion for John Kerry: U.S. candidate Kerry 'offside' on fundamental Catholic life issues. Western Catholic Reporter <http://www.wcr.ab.ca/bishops/henry/2004/henry052404.shtml>. Accessed 31 May, 2004.

10. Vatican Council II, [Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People](#), 18 November, 1965 (Apostolicam Actuositatem) 8.

11. Vatican Council II, [Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church](#), 28 October, 1965 (Christus Dominus) 12.

12. Vatican Council II, [Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People](#), 18 November, 1965 (Apostolicam Actuositatem) 24.

"For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself." Vatican Council II, [Declaration on Religious Liberty](#), 7 December, 1965 (Dignitatis Humanae) 14

13. See CCRL Position Paper: [The Church and Political Affairs](#), and [Catholic Candidates for Public Office](#)

14. "To grasp the nature of the controversy, one must understand the distinctive nature of Catholic doctrine regarding the Eucharist. Catholics believe that in receiving Communion, we receive the greatest of gifts: the body of Jesus Christ. St. Paul reminds us: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:27). By sharing in Communion, Catholics testify that they are in fundamental union of heart and mind. On fundamental life issues, Kerry is clearly offside." Bishop Frederick Henry, *supra*

15. On bishops, see the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 888-896. Also: Vatican Council II [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church](#), 21 November, 1964 (Lumen Gentium) successors of the apostles, 20; who hears them hears Christ, who despises them despises Christ, 20; bishops take the place of Christ, 21; authority exercised for the good of the entire Church, 22; authority conditional upon union with the pope, 23; faithful obliged to adhere to and submit to their doctrinal definitions, 25; authentic teachers, endowed with authority of Christ, 25; authority to regulate sacraments 26; authority to govern, 27; vicars and legates of Christ, 27; authority defended, upheld, strengthened by authority of universal Church; exercise the office of Christ, 28; ordination confers authority of Christ to teach, sanctify and rule, 32. Vatican Council II, [Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church](#), 28 October, 1965 (Christus Dominus) authentic teachers by virtue of the Holy Spirit, 2; authority conditional upon union with the pope, 4; without prejudice to the power of the pope, 8; care for dioceses/flocks, 11; authority divinely

conferred, 16.

16. [Lumen Gentium](#), 14; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 7